THE NEW HANGMAN By LAURENCE HOUSMAN

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WITHDRAWN

Mary Mellish
Archibald
Memorial

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THE NEW HANGMAN

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LAURENCE HOUSMAN

THE NEW HANGMAN

A Play in One Act

LONDON & NEW YORK
G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS
1930

Mary Mellish
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Memorial

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CHARACTERS

THE PRISON GOVERNOR

THE CHAPLAIN

HEAD WARDER

SECOND WARDER

THIRD WARDER

THE HANGMAN

A 32961

Within the entrance to the Prison is a sort of office, containing a desk, an office-stool, a hanging clock, and a telephone. Along one wall stands a bench. Everything is severely plain, ugly as well—for even plain things in a prison must not be beautiful. The office leads into a stone corridor, the door to which is now open. It is early morning, and winter; for the clock says seven-forty and it is still almost dark. A gas-jet gives dull illumination to the scene, into which the cold morning light gradually enters. The Second Warder is speaking at the telephone, and finishes just after the Third Warder has entered.

2ND WARDER. Yes . . . Yes . . . Yes . . . Right . . . 'bye.

3RD WARD. Has he come?

2ND WARD. (*queerly*). Yes . . . he's *come.*

3RD WARD. What d'you mean? Anything the matter?

2ND WARD. I don't know. He's *queer.*

3RD WARD. Drunk?

2ND WARD. (*cautiously*). I should say—*not.*

3RD WARD. Oh; a bit nervous, I suppose? Don't wonder: doing it for the first time. You can't get used to *some* things all at once.

2ND WARD. He's been assistant before.

3RD WARD. Not the same thing. So have I. But I'm not used to it.

[*He drinks, and hands his flask.*

2ND WARD. Still—it's got to be done. [*Drinks.*

3RD WARD. 'Twouldn't be, if all those who say so had to take their turns at it.

2ND WARD. Their turns?

3RD WARD. Yes: touch a button, or pull a lever. That's all it is—*at the last.*

2ND WARD. Here comes the Governor.

[*As the Governor enters, followed by the Head Warder, they spring to attention and salute.*

GOVERNOR (*curtly*). Morning.

2ND AND 3RD WARD. Morning, sir.

GOVERNOR. Has he come?

2ND WARD. Yessir. He's just gone through, sir. But the Deputy Sheriff's not come, sir. He's just 'phoned to say his car's broke down.

GOVERNOR (*irritably*). Well, we can't wait for *that.*

2ND WARD. No, sir. That's what he said. Said you'd better go on, sir.

GOVERNOR. Irregular. But—oh, yes; *waiting* would be horrible! Is all ready?

HEAD WARD. Should be, sir. 'Twas all fixed up last night, sir.

GOVERNOR. Yes. I mean—are *we* ready?

HEAD WARD. Yes, sir.

GOVERNOR. Well, then, he should be here. And the Chaplain: where's *he?* . . . Is he in the—cell?

3RD WARD. No, sir. In the Chapel, I think, sir; saying his prayers.

GOVERNOR. Better tell him the time, then. It's on the quarter.

3RD WARD. I don't think he's likely to forget, sir; judging from the look of him just now.

GOVERNOR. Upset, eh?

3RD WARD. Didn't look—not quite himself, sir.

GOVERNOR (*half to himself*). Who *can*—I'd like to know?

HEAD WARD. Very true, sir.

[*The Second Warder has made a move toward the corridor, but now turns back to say:*

2ND WARD. He's coming, sir; now, sir.

GOVERNOR. Who? The Chaplain?

2ND WARD. No, sir, the—— It's the *new one*, sir.

[*The Hangman enters. He is youngish, with a thin face, slightly lined. Dressed in black, he is the only one that is bare-headed. He carries his hat in his hand, and presently has laid it on the desk.*

GOVERNOR. Oh, good morning.

HANGMAN. Good morning, sir.

GOVERNOR. Is everything ready?

HANGMAN. Everything *is* ready, sir.

GOVERNOR. Your assistant—where's he?

HANGMAN. I haven't brought an assistant, sir.

GOVERNOR. Oh? That's unusual. Why not?

HANGMAN. Won't be necessary, sir.

GOVERNOR. You seem pretty sure of yourself. And this your first time.

HANGMAN (*coldly*). The matter is left to my discretion, sir.

GOVERNOR. Oh, quite. I'm not——

HANGMAN. I've been an assistant myself, sir. But *I* shan't need one—to-day.

2ND WARD (*aside to 3rd*). He's queer, you know.

GOVERNOR (*to Head Warder*). Brown, what sort of night has the prisoner had?

HEAD WARD. (*gravely*). A bit restless, sir. Woke early: started to cry. Didn't get to sleep again.

GOVERNOR. Had any breakfast?

HEAD WARD. Yes, sir; but he brought it all up again.

GOVERNOR. Ah! Poor fellow! No use to him anyway. Have you given him—anything else?

HEAD WARD. Yes, sir. I gave him two—stiff ones. That made him feel better: the second one.

GOVERNOR. Give him a third, if he wants it.

HEAD WARD. Very good, sir. [*He starts to go.*

GOVERNOR. And—Brown . . .

HEAD WARD. (*turning back*). Yes, sir?

GOVERNOR. Just stay with him yourself. Send the other two out. It's not much anyone can do now; but you're—more—more understanding. Do what you can!

HEAD WARD. That third'll do more for him now, sir, than *I* can.

GOVERNOR. Very well: give it him.

HEAD WARD. I will, sir.

GOVERNOR. Make it as strong as you like.

HEAD WARD. (*understandingly*). Yes, sir. [*He goes.*

[*The Governor looks at the clock, then at his watch. He moves restlessly about, then speaks.*

GOVERNOR. Time's getting on. Thomas, you'd better call the Chaplain.

2ND WARD. I see him coming now, sir.

[*They wait. Steps are heard. The Chaplain enters, staggering.*

GOVERNOR. Good G—! [*The word breaks unsaid.*

CHAPLAIN. Governor, I—I can't! I still know what I'm about. I can't get away from myself! I've tried. I—— Oh, God forgive me! I'm drunk; but it's not a bit of good!

GOVERNOR (*away from the Warders*). God, man! Pull yourself together! Have you no sense of *decency?* You, a clergyman!

CHAPLAIN. That's why I'm like this. You can't have decency when you are hanging a man!

2ND WARD. (*to 3rd*). By God! That's true.

CHAPLAIN. I can't face it. I can't! I'm not drunk enough! Oh, why did I come here? I'd never have taken the post if I'd known—if I'd thought *this* would happen! I can't face it, I tell you!

HANGMAN. You needn't trouble, sir. You won't have to face it to-day.

[*The Governor turns about in startled surprise: the Chaplain with a sort of miserable hopefulness.*

CHAPLAIN. What? . . . Not—not *dead?* Has there been a reprieve?

HANGMAN. There'll be no hanging here to-day, sir, unless someone else takes it on.

GOVERNOR. No ha—? What d'you mean, man?

HANGMAN. I mean, sir, that I'm not going to do it.

GOVERNOR (*stupefied*). You—are not—going to do it?

HANGMAN. No, sir . . . I didn't come here to-day with any intention of doing it.

GOVERNOR. Then what the devil did you take the job on for? For a joke?

HANGMAN. Just for this, sir—you can take it as a joke, if you like: just to see whether anyone else is willing to do what I won't do—ever again, so help me God!

GOVERNOR. Do I understand that you accepted the appointment without any intention of carrying out the duties?

HANGMAN. That's so, sir.

GOVERNOR. You call that honourable?

HANGMAN. No, sir. One can't have much sense of honour left to become a hangman. I lost all mine being an assistant. I was at twelve hangings, sir. I wonder at how many you've been.

GOVERNOR (*stupefied*). But this—this is the most unheard of thing I ever——

HANGMAN. Yes, sir. That's why I'm doing it. It's going to be heard of now.

GOVERNOR (*trying to keep calm*). Will you be good enough to explain?

HANGMAN. What am I to explain, sir?

GOVERNOR. Why—if you had such an objection to hanging—did you apply for the post?

HANGMAN. I applied for it, sir, because I thought that, by doing this, I might save just one man's life, and shame a few others from ever taking part again in such a dirty business as this.

CHAPLAIN (*a little insincerely, but feeling he has a small duty to do*). But do you not realize that you are putting all of us in a very awkward position?

HANGMAN. Yes, sir. I *do*, sir.

CHAPLAIN. Then why——?

HANGMAN. But not such an awkward position as you are asking me to put—someone else in.

GOVERNOR. That is not *our* doing. That is the law.

HANGMAN. Yes, the law: made by human beings, expecting others to do for 'em what they won't do themselves. And it's human beings, sir, are going to *unmake* that law . . . I'm making a start—on my own.

GOVERNOR. By getting yourself dismissed?

HANGMAN. Oh yes, sir! That follows, of course. But there's not a music-hall in London, sir, wouldn't give me three hundred pounds to-night, just to stand up and be looked at for a week—the hangman that wouldn't hang people! And a Sunday paper would give me another hundred for an interview—all to itself. Well, sir—that being so—I'm hoping there's somebody'll give me a cleaner job—for a bit less pay.

GOVERNOR. But man! You're mad. What on earth put such a thing into your head? Have you realized what trouble you are getting yourself into? Why! You can be prosecuted for *this*.

HANGMAN. Can I, sir? Then it'll all help. No, sir; I'm not getting myself into trouble; I'm getting out of it—easing my conscience. I've been a murderer. To-day I make public confession.

GOVERNOR. "A murderer," you say?

HANGMAN. Yes, sir. What else is a hangman but a man who murders to order—for money—in cold blood? D'you think a hangman does his job for "love of society"? *He doesn't get any!* He has to hide himself under a changed name. Decent men won't know him; a decent woman won't marry him. Nobody in my street knows who I am. I got this job because for five years I'd been assistant to the last—"knew the ropes," I suppose! When one of 'em broke, we had to do it over again. *That* didn't get into the papers, though. No fear! . . . The last time I assisted, we hanged a man who, I believe, was innocent. Others didn't. But if the jury had been made to come and see their verdict carried out —maybe they'd have thought so, too. The truth shows clearer on the drop sometimes than in the witness-box. If 'twas part of the law that judges and juries must be in at the death, there'd be more acquittals, sir. They leave that to us: we finish the job for 'em; and they despise us for it! But they say "It's got to be done."

GOVERNOR (*starting, and looking at the clock*). Yes! And by God it *has* got to be done! But who's going to do it?

HANGMAN. It's all ready now, sir. A child could do it—only a lever to be pulled. And anyone here

knows well enough how to pinion a man, and —pull on the cap. Leave me out: there's four others here fit to carry out the law.

[*There is a pause. The Governor looks at the two warders.*

GOVERNOR. Well. Will either of you men volunteer? . . . Roberts?

3RD WARD. Don't ask me, sir. My wife's expecting, sir. If she knew . . . No, sir; I can't do it.

GOVERNOR. You, Thomas? What about you? It's a twenty-pound job, remember.

2ND WARD. It's no part of *my* duty, sir.

HANGMAN (*to Governor*). Why don't *you* do it, sir? (*The Governor makes no sign.*) Wants a bit more faith, doesn't it, sir? P'r'aps the Reverend will oblige. [*The Prison bell begins tolling.*

GOVERNOR. God! Stop that damned bell! What the devil did they start that for?

2ND WARD. It was the order, sir. It's three minutes to eight, sir. [*Bell tolls again.*

GOVERNOR. Roberts, put me through—emergency call—Commissioner's House, Centre Office, Whitehall. And, Thomas, stop that bell! . . . Quick!

2ND WARD. Yessir! [*Bell tolls.*

[*He goes, while the Third Warder engages the telephone, and puts through a code call. But*

his words are muffled by the speaking of other voices.

CHAPLAIN (*approaching the Hangman*). I don't—I don't think you are right. I don't think you are at all right, Mr. Hangman; no, not at all. But, personally, I'm very much obliged to you.

[*Bell tolls.*

HANGMAN. Oh, don't mention it, sir. I wasn't considering *you*, sir.

CHAPLAIN. I was considering myself, though.

HANGMAN. We all do, sir. (*Bell tolls.*) Curious thing, isn't it, sir, that the question we've found hardest to answer was asked by the first murderer: "Am I my brother's keeper?" (*Bell tolls.*) We all want to say "No," like him, when it comes to the pinch.

[*The tolling of the bell has stopped.*

3RD WARD. You are through, sir.

[*The Governor goes to the 'phone.*

GOVERNOR. Yes, Governor, Wandswood Prison, speaking. A terrible thing has happened here. We have an execution at eight o'clock—two minutes from now—and the Hangman has struck. . . . No, no! Hasn't struck anybody —struck *work*. Won't do his job. What are we to do? . . . Well, but somebody must decide! I can only report how the case stands . . .

I've no further authority. . . . Oh, no: absolutely refuses—absolutely. . . . I don't know: stunt, or religious mania, I don't know which. . . . No, they won't; none of them. . . . You can't force them. . . . No, 'tisn't enough. Besides, it isn't a financial, it's a moral objection. . . . Yes, but what are we to do? I want instructions. . . . No, no, he's not drunk. He just won't do it . . . I *know*. Time's up, and the poor devil waiting—wondering, perhaps, whether we've forgotten him! . . . Yes, horrible! The suspense must be awful. . . . Yes, I admit the responsibility. But you can't hang without a hangman. . . . No, it's *his* business. . . . You sent him, he's *your* agent; he's failed you, and we can't offer you a substitute. . . . No, I am not prepared to do that—nor is anyone else whom I could trust. . . . All I'm asking is for instructions. What am I to do? . . . Well, for the present, I've stopped them tolling the bell. Is that to go on? . . . Well, then, for God's sake get somebody who *can!* . . . (*The Prison clock starts to strike eight. The Second Warder has returned.*) God! It's started again! Thomas, didn't I tell you to stop that bell?

2ND WARD. It's only eight o'clock striking, sir. . . .

GOVERNOR. "Only!" (*He waits. The clock goes on striking. It ends. He turns back to the receiver.*) Yes . . . oh, yes, sir . . . yes . . . yes. . . . Well, of course it'll be a terrible thing to have to start all over again another day. . . . Public opinion? Yes, quite so. . . . Yes, very. . . . Almost impossible. . . . No, sir, one can't be found in twenty-four hours, or trained either. Besides, how are you going to keep it out of the papers? There's a crowd waiting now. . . . Why, yes, under the circumstances, I should hope so. Awful to have it again. . . . Very well. . . . Thank you. . . . Then you will report to the Home Office, and we will await further instructions. . . . Yes . . . yes. . . . Oh, yes. I can settle with *him*. . . . Quite. . . . Good-bye.

[*While the Governor has been at the 'phone, the Hangman has taken up his hat and has gone toward the outer door. There, however, he is held up by the Third Warder, who awaits the Governor's instructions before unlocking the door.*

GOVERNOR. Where's that fellow?

HANGMAN. I'm going, sir.

GOVERNOR. Going, are you?

HANGMAN. If you don't mind, sir. Unless you've got orders to keep me, sir.

GOVERNOR. No . . . the matter's out of my hands now. You can go. . . . Let him out!

[*The Warder unlocks the door.*

CHAPLAIN. You know you've behaved disgracefully.

HANGMAN. Yes, sir; but I've saved you and others from behaving worse. Good-day, sir.

[*There is no answer. He goes out accompanied by the Second Warder. Further unlockings are heard. An unseen door opens; through it comes the restless murmuring of a crowd.*

GOVERNOR. Roberts, go and tell Brown to come to me at once. You stay.

3RD WARD. Yessir. [*He goes.*

CHAPLAIN (*slowly recovering his wits*). Dear me, now! Governor, this has been a great shock—a dreadful shock to me! But oh! what a relief!

GOVERNOR (*sternly*). I shall have to report you, sir, for being drunk in the execution of your duty.

CHAPLAIN. "Extenuating circumstances," Governor! "Execution," you say? But we didn't execute. So I wasn't.

[*Re-enter the Head Warder.*

GOVERNOR. You've heard what's happened, Brown?

HEAD WARD. Yes, sir.

GOVERNOR. I 'phoned the Chief Commissioner for instructions. There'll be no execution now, I'm sure.

HEAD WARD. That so, sir?

GOVERNOR. I could get nobody else to volunteer.

HEAD WARD. (*very quietly*). No, sir? You didn't send for *me*, sir?

GOVERNOR. No, Brown. I did *not*. I thought I knew *you* well enough.

HEAD WARD. Much obliged to you, sir.

GOVERNOR. Go back to the prisoner; say I'm coming. Tell him there's *hope*. [*Head Warder goes.*

[*A sound of strange uproar comes from without. The Second Warder enters hastily.*

GOVERNOR. What's all that noise about?

2ND WARD. It's the crowd, sir. He's out there speaking to them.

GOVERNOR. He? Who?

2ND WARD. The Hangman, sir.

[*A sound of cheering.*

2ND WARD. (*in official consternation*). He's *got* them, sir! He's making himself popular!

CHAPLAIN. How awful! How very awful!

GOVERNOR. Great Scott! What will the Home Office say to this?

[*The cheering goes on.*

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